

Have you ever wondered why your group activities fail to inspire students?

Consider the following two quotes and think about your own experiences in the use of 'group work' (which I'll also refer to interchangeably with 'cooperative learning' for the duration of this presentation).

'The closest I ever came to failing a course was actually my high school physics class. Every day we did group work, so obviously nothing ever got done.'

Greg Bernhardt, physics student

'The proven benefits of cooperative learning notwithstanding, instructors who attempt it frequently encounter resistance and sometimes open hostility from the students. Bright students complain about being held back by their slower teammates, weaker or less assertive students complain about being discounted or ignored in group sessions, and resentments build when some team members fail to pull their weight. Instructors with sufficient patience generally find ways to deal with these problems, but others become discouraged and revert to the traditional teacher-centered instructional paradigm, which is a loss both for them and for their students.'

Richard M. Felder, Department of Chemical Engineering, North Carolina State University

The first thing you might say is, 'well, these are both related to the teaching and learning of science, which must surely be different to the way students interact when learning a language.' I hope you can get past that and look at what is actually being said, both from the learner and the educator. For me, the subject matter isn't that important; what is important is the notion of ineffective group interaction and the reasons for it.

Did anything said in those quotes above strike a chord with you? Some of them are immediately familiar. Indeed, some of them go through my mind every time I set up a group task in my classroom.

So, do cooperative group tasks have to fail on least at some level? Well, experience has shown me that some students like to work in groups while others do not. Some will adopt a leadership role while others will have little to no involvement, regardless of the people they are working with or the encouragement given by the teacher. Nevertheless, I feel that there are more fundamental reasons why group work is not always as effective as we'd like and these are to do with what we allow to happen, or rather don't allow to happen.

Traditionally in ELT we have examined the task and the people in the group. Today I hope to show you that there is one additional factor.

1. The Task

The task itself is of paramount importance. Cooperative learning should involve students working in teams to accomplish a common goal, under conditions that include the following elements (Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker (2009):

i. Positive interdependence

Team members are obliged to rely on one another to achieve the goal. If any team members fail to do their part, everyone suffers consequences.

ii. Individual accountability

All students in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the work and for mastery of all of the material to be learned.

iii. Face-to-face promotive interaction

Although some of the group work may be portioned out and done individually, some must be done interactively, with group members providing one another with feedback, challenging one another's conclusions and reasoning, and perhaps most importantly, teaching and encouraging one another.

iv. Appropriate use of collaborative skills

Students are encouraged and helped to develop and practice trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.

v. Group processing

Team members set group goals, periodically assess what they are doing well as a team, and identify changes they will make to function more effectively in the future.

How many of these actually happen when you set up cooperative learning situations in class?

Don't feel bad if you don't see all of them happening. Even though I've been giving this matter some thought, I doubt that all of the group work that goes on in my classes includes all of these elements. In fact, getting to this point has been a long and arduous journey, as Jacobs and Ball (1996) suggest:

'In some ELT coursebooks, group activities appear to have been created merely by putting the words 'in groups' or 'in pairs' in front of what were formerly individual activities, without making any changes to encourage learners to co-operate with one another.'

This quote comes from 1996, after a detailed investigation into how the course books of that 'generation' were dealing with group work. Jacobs and Ball suggested at that point that the advent of communicative language teaching and TBL were having a positive influence on how group tasks were being implemented in books. We can probably see that this change has occurred and group work is catered for more effectively these days as a result of such advances in methodological pedagogy.

Challenge #1

Examine the cooperative learning that occurs in your classes. Which elements are evident? Which are totally lacking? How could you enable these to occur?

2. The learner

Not only do we need to think about getting the task right, we also need to ensure that we have taken the learner into consideration. For example, Reid (1987) advocates developing a 'culture-sensitive pedagogy'. Group work, Reid notes, is particularly desirable in certain cultures. Flowerdew (1998) reiterates, noting that '*group work is a useful methodological tool for Chinese learners*':

- It exploits the Confucian value of co-operation, which would seem to foster a style conducive to learning;
- It can be used to counterbalance the Confucian concepts of 'face' and self-effacement, which could be considered as aspects which impair the learning process.

Although this exemplifies how group work is affected by one particular culture, we can easily imagine how such considerations might have an effect in our context, too.

In addition to cultural factors, we also have to accept that in a group that is given free reign over its own destiny unchecked, certain personalities will more than likely dominate the processes that take place. Given that we often put learners in groups for the purpose of promoting spoken communication, we must consider that certain personalities thrive in groups while others fare less well. As Underhill (1987) notes, in groups there is, '*danger that a discussion/conversation technique will reward extrovert and talkative personalities rather than those who are less forthcoming.*'

Challenge #2

Examine how the cooperative learning that occurs in your classes works in terms of the participation level of each student? Does everyone exercise their right to participate in the group? How might we facilitate this better?

3. Group formation

Now, if you're thinking, '*how can all this happen in what is more than likely a one-off activity that may only last a few minutes*' you're doing well, as that's one of the things I'll be getting to later on. If you think that getting all of these things to happen is the key to successful group work, I've got some bad news. Not only should cooperative learning include each of these elements, you have to remember that well functioning groups don't just happen. It takes time for a group to develop to a point where it can be effective and where all members feel connected to it. Again, you might be wondering how a group can develop when the learners are only working together for a very short period of time. This is pretty much my point: why are we placing restrictions on how well a group can work together?

My interest in this was piqued by a brief exchange with one of my students at the end of a lesson in which we had 'done' some group work. This is what Hazal said:

'We really like working in groups in your classes because you give us a chance to grow as a group. You don't force us to work with people we don't like and we can easily establish how our group will work.'

This interested me because it didn't really seem to fit into what the literature was saying about cooperative learning.

The theories on group formation date back almost fifty years. Bruce Tuckman (1965) identified four stages that characterize the development of groups. Understanding these stages can help determine what is happening with a group and how to supervise what is occurring. These four group development stages are known as forming, storming, norming, and performing as described below.

i. Forming

At this stage the group comes together and members begin to develop their relationship with one another and learn what is expected of them. This is the stage when team building begins and trust starts to develop. Group members will start establishing limits on acceptable behavior through experimentation. Other members' reactions will determine if a behavior will be repeated. This is also the time when the tasks of the group and the members will be decided.

Challenge #3

Examine how groups form in your classes. Can learners choose who they work with or is the decision made by you?

ii. Storming

During this stage of group development, interpersonal conflicts arise and differences of opinion about the group and its goals will surface. If the group is unable to clearly state its purposes and goals or if it cannot agree on shared goals, the group may collapse at this point. It is important to work through the conflict at this time and to establish clear goals. It is necessary for there to be discussion so everyone feels heard and can come to an agreement on the direction the group is to move in.

Challenge #4

How often does storming occur in your classes? Do you think it would be less of an issue if the forming stage had happened differently?

iii. Norming

After the group has resolved its conflicts, it can now establish patterns of how to get its work done. Expectations of each other are clearly laid down and accepted by all members of the group. Formal and informal procedures are established in delegating tasks, responding to questions, and in the process by which the group functions. Members of the group come to understand how the group as a whole operates.

Challenge #5

Do groups ever get the chance to reach the norming stage? Do group tasks ever require the adoption of individual roles and procedures?

iv. Performing

During this final stage of development, issues related to roles, expectations, and norms are no longer of major importance. The group is now focused on its task, working intentionally and effectively to accomplish its goals. The group will find that it can celebrate its accomplishments and that members will be learning new skills and sharing roles.

After a group enters the performing stage, it is unrealistic to expect it to remain there permanently. When new members join or some people leave, there will be a new process of forming, storming, and norming engaged as everyone learns about one another. External events may lead to conflicts within the group. To remain healthy, groups will go through all of these processes in a continuous loop.

When conflict arises in a group, do not try to silence the conflict or to run from it. Let the conflict come out into the open so people can discuss it. If the conflict is kept under the surface, members will not be able to build trusting relationships and this could harm the group's effectiveness. If handled properly, the group will come out of the conflict with a stronger sense of cohesiveness than before.

Challenge #6

How many of your tasks require your group to begin working as though they had reached the performing stage? What effect do you think this has on the task you have set?

v. A fifth stage

In 1977, Tuckman, along with Mary Ann Jensen, added a fifth stage to the 4 stages: adjourning, that involves completing the task and breaking up the team.

Challenge #7

How long is your group engaged in a cooperative learning task before they are expected to adjourn? Is this always the case with group work in your classes? How does this affect the way that you and your learners approach cooperative learning?

Method

Quantitative research was conducted with my two classes from the first semester of the 2011-12 academic year. The students' ideas were elicited through ethnographic research methods. During the sixteen week period, I allowed my students a large degree of self determination in deciding how group tasks should proceed and observed their responses during classes. Students were interviewed towards the end of the semester, in groups of three. The interviews followed an unstructured format, in which the students were invited to give their thoughts on the group work that had occurred in our classes and how it compared with previous experiences of group work in their education. Their responses were transcribed and have been grouped according to how they relate to Tuckman's stages of group formation.

Results

Tuckman's stages of group formation serve as the basis for categorizing the student's responses. Selected comments have been chosen to display the themes that became evident during the interviews.

In terms of **forming**:

- ☞ 'We don't feel confident speaking with some people. If I don't talk with them normally why would I talk with them in a group?'
- ☞ 'Sometimes we spread around class because we know the teacher will make groups and we know where to sit so we can be in a group together.'
- ☞ 'Some students dominate and some hide and do nothing. It isn't like a group really.'

In terms of **storming**:

- ☞ 'We like to work with people who are our friends.'
- ☞ 'When the teacher puts us in a group, I am mostly unhappy. Some people in class I don't feel happy working with. If I am in a group with these people, I cannot work.'

In terms of **norming**:

- ☞ 'I prefer working alone. We can never distribute roles in a group.'
- ☞ 'If we are in a group with friends, we can easily say, 'OK, I'll do this and you can do that.'
- ☞ 'Sometimes you say to us we can work with the people we want to work with and this is effective. We can immediately divide the work and begin.'
- ☞ 'One time you gave us papers with different job descriptions and this was good. We could choose a job and stay with it in the group. Also, I knew responsibilities of others at this time.'
- ☞ 'I cannot work effectively in a group. We spend most time doing unimportant things, like 'who is first to speak' and other things like this. I always want to work alone and be efficient.'

In terms of **performing**:

- ☞ 'There is no motivation for us to perform: we know the group work will end and we will just return to our seat in the class.'
- ☞ 'Sometimes teacher moves us to join another group. This kills me, because I feel so uncomfortable. I need to really start again from nothing.'

In terms of **adjourning**:

- ☞ 'Sometimes we just wait for time to pass. Why? Because we can give an answer to the teacher easily at the end without working and we know the teacher will move on to a new activity anyway.'

While some of these comments overlap and can be placed in more than one of the stages, it is interesting to note that the students identified an aspect of group work in class that related to all of the stages.

Discussion: A Personal plan for group work development

Recognizing the different stages of group development is just a start. There are different skills and techniques needed to guide a group through the stages. Here are some questions that will help me - and you - generate some thoughts on how to do it.

Forming

- ◆ How can we make sure that everyone connected to the group is involved?
- ◆ How can we create an environment that fosters trust and builds commitment to the group?
- ◆ Who should choose the members of the group and what should our involvement be in group formation?

Storming

- ◆ How can we make sure group members are open to other people's ideas and allow differences of opinion to be discussed?
- ◆ How might we keep everyone focused on the purpose of the group and the topic of conflict?
- ◆ How can we identify and examine biases that may be blocking progress or preventing another member to be treated fairly.
- ◆ Does anyone find themselves in a group with people they would never dream of working with in any other situation?

Norming

- ◆ How should we encourage members to engage in collaboration and teamwork?

Performing

- ◆ How can we celebrate accomplishments, encourage and empower members to learn?

Adjourning

- ◆ How can we sustain group involvement beyond the short-term task?
- ◆ Why not use the same groups for subsequent cooperative learning situations, rather than abandoning it so quickly?

A) Some things I currently do

I don't see any problem in allowing my learners to choose their own groups, nor do I ever insist on a 'magic number' of group members. Bearing in mind that I am with my classes for approximately four months – I know not all of you are in a similar situation – I allow a couple of weeks of feeling the way in which the learners try out different groups to see who they work well with.

Once I see that a particular group is working well I encourage those people to work together all the time. Any potential benefit from working with a fresh group is usually offset by having to go through the stages of formation from the start. Consequently, they get to a point where they are able to norm and perform quite quickly.

I make sure that the cooperative learning situation doesn't just end with an adjournment that hasn't resulted in completion of something worthwhile.

B) Some brilliant ideas from others

My colleague Sharon Turner is doing some exciting work with restricted Facebook groups to enhance and speed up the process of group formation, and has written about this on her blog:

SHHH it's a Secret!!! Secret Facebook Groups in the English Language Classroom

<http://www.sharonzspace.com/?p=810>

Tyson Seburn, a blogging friend who has also been conducting research in this area, is working on Academic Reading Circles. The basis of his work is that clearly defining roles within the group and creating interdependency from the off will enable group activities to work more effectively.

ARC – Academic Reading Circles

<http://fourc.ca/tag/arc/>

C) Your turn

Please look at this short video of my students preparing a poster related to the content of the reading we had been looking at earlier in the day.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtpXHWpB3Yo>

At what point of group formation do you think they are at? How do you see this affecting the task they are trying to complete? Is there anything you'd like to suggest?

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